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One City One Life

Experts plot course to deal with chemical-tainted water

By Keith Rogers
Review-Journal

While Sierra Club members handed out 100 bottles of water Thursday to motorists and pedestrians along Henderson's Lake Mead Drive, experts huddled on Water Street to plot a course for dealing with a rocket fuel chemical in the Colorado River.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out we need safe, clean water," Sierra Club member Deanna White said.

White and the club's conservation chairman, Randy Harness, discussed their hour-long awareness campaign while cars and trucks zipped in front of an industrial complex that's home to Kerr-McGee Chemical Corp., one of two companies that state environmental officials have blamed for contaminating ground water with perchlorate, a component of the solid, rocket fuel oxidizer ammonium perchlorate.

The other company, American Pacific Corp., produced the chemical at its PEPCON plant that was leveled by explosions 10 years ago, about two miles west of where the Sierra Club members staged their campaign.

"We're doing this to remind people that environmental protections are health protections," Harness said.

Meanwhile, at the Henderson Convention Center on Water Street, the group of experts known as the Inter-agency Perchlorate Steering Committee wrapped up a three-day public forum on resolving the contamination problem.

Committee leader Dan Rogers, a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, said the task is like driving a train while the tracks are being laid in front of it.

Technologies to detect the chemical in the parts-per-billion range are barely more than a year old. Cleanup technologies are in the pilot plant stage with the first, tested methods to go online this year in California where problem first surfaced in wells downstream of aerospace and explosives production facilities.

All of this, Rogers said, is being done while toxicologists in laboratories across the nation are completing eight studies that focus primarily on rats consuming the chemical. The end result will be an assessment on what levels, if any, in water supplies can affect human health.

The primary health concern, scientists believe, is perchlorate's potential effect on the thyroid gland's ability to use iodine to produce hormones for growth and



Sierra Club volunteer Jane Feldman hands a bottle of water to a motorist at Lake Mead Drive and Reserve Boulevard in Henderson on Thursday. Club members handed out 100 bottles of water to raise awareness about water quality problems stemming from industrial pollution in the Las Vegas Valley.

Photo by Steve Andrascik/Review-Journal

development.

But participants in the forum said Thursday they want to know if perchlorate can affect bone marrow and if there are any related health effects in combination with other contaminants in food and water supplies.

Rogers said scientists will need to understand how perchlorate, a highly soluble salt ion, travels through the ecosystem and affects plants and animals.

Specifically, he said, they will need to understand how lettuce is affected by water tainted with perchlorate because American Indian tribes, who have joined the committee, irrigate their lettuce and cotton crops with Colorado River water that contains trace amounts of the chemical.

The ecosystem research, Rogers said, could take years to complete, but hopefully scientists will have launched projects long before that to stop the contamination at its sources upstream of Las Vegas Wash. The wash empties into Lake Mead, a drinking water supply for millions in the Southwest.

Matthew Leivas, a Chemehuevi tribal council member, said the committee needs to bring Mexico into its discussion because the Mexican government, also has rights to Colorado River water.

He said he also wonders why Colorado River tribes weren't immediately informed about the perchlorate problem and why the Bureau of Indian Affairs has not been participating.

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